The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp

■■Prologue■■

...Are you awake? Oh, I'm sorry, I just enjoy watching people sleep, and I couldn't help myself... When I find myself sharing a bus seat with someone, I tend to stare at their sleeping faces. Where are you headed? ...Morioh, is it? Then, we're headed to the same destination. No, we haven't passed it yet. I'll wake you up when we get there, so please feel free to sleep until then. The bus is quite comfortable for sleeping.

...What brings you to Morioh? That luggage above is yours, right? It's a large trunk. Are you here for sightseeing? I'm on a business trip. Is this your first visit to Morioh? Yes, it's a nice place. Shall I tell you a bit about it? Morioh is a commuter town that rapidly developed in the 1980s. The town flower is the Adonis. Its specialty product is miso-marinated beef tongue. The population is about 60,000. ...Actually, there's an interesting fact. The number of people who go missing every year is abnormally high. Over a hundred people vanish, and half of them are children... I wonder why that is... Oh, can't sleep if I'm talking? I'm sorry, I'll be quiet.

...Have you lost the desire to sleep? Then, shall we talk until we arrive? I didn't have anything else to do but watch you sleep... Is talking a bother? It's fine, I can keep talking by myself. What shall we talk about...

...A mysterious story? Sure, that's fine. I travel a lot for work and end up hearing various strange stories. But which one to tell... The story about a mysterious high-speed flying creature that can only be seen in photos and videos... The story of a resurrected death-row inmate... The story of a thief who couldn't be killed by bullets... Maybe I should start with a story about my dog.

...You want to hear about the thief? Sure, I'll tell you. It was, if I remember correctly, three years ago, at a museum in I Prefecture. Do you remember the art theft incident? Yes, that one. At that time, the museum was exhibiting valuable artifacts that had been discovered in a certain country. Although called artifacts, they were essentially treasures. From underground in a rural village, a large amount of gold and silver ornaments, jewels, and such were

unearthed. There was a collective term for them, but I've forgotten it. Naturally, the museum was guarded by a strict surveillance system and armed security guards to ward off intruders. The entire museum was like a gigantic safe. It was practically impossible to get in or out... However, one night, someone managed to break in... We don't know how many thieves there were... Late at night, a security guard was making his usual quiet rounds in the museum. As he passed by the exhibition room, he noticed that all the exhibits had vanished... Just ten minutes earlier, another guard had checked, and everything was still there... How did the intruder get in...? Every door and window was securely locked. The glass cases holding the exhibits were designed to trigger an alarm at the slightest human touch. Yet, the treasures that had been inside the cases had disappeared into thin air... The security guard immediately sounded the alarm and notified the police. Armed officers were on standby every night, prepared for such incidents. The security

guards and officers searched for the thief. Eventually, one of the thieves was found on the museum's back premises. No, perhaps the man allowed himself to be found to hold off the officers... Probably to help his accomplices escape. He was a tall, slim man. He stood quietly, gun in hand, waiting for the people chasing him. The officers pointed their guns at the man and ordered him not to resist. However, the man ignored their words. Slowly, he aimed his gun at the officers... The officers fired before being shot. Nearly ten bullets flew at the man. All hit their target. ...Now, here's where it gets strange. Despite taking all the bullets, the man didn't seem particularly bothered by them. He calmly dropped the hammer of his gun. Whether the bullets pierced his body or made a hole in his forehead, he showed no pain nor agitation. Indifferently, he methodically shot the officers lined up before him, one by one, from left to right. Most of the officers died instantly with a hole in their foreheads. However, one unarmed security guard was watching the whole incident from a distance. This story comes from him. How much of it you believe is up to you. Well, I don’t believe in those kinds of things myself…
Just as I finished the story, we're about to arrive at Morioh. Are you ready to get off the bus?

When Josuke explained to me about the special ability known as a Stand, I remembered the inexplicable phenomena that occurred to my own body. Until I moved to Morioh, I knew nothing about Stands, but the existence of that power conveniently explained the incident. There's definitely a possibility that I unknowingly activated a Stand ability. It was about ten months before I moved to Morioh. I was solving arithmetic worksheets as my mother had instructed. In the cramped four-and-a-half tatami room, the setting sun cast its rays diagonally through the window. We had moved in almost overnight, so there was hardly any furniture in the room, just my mother's cherished alarm clock and a glass bottle placed in a corner of the room alongside a sleeping bag.

When I tried to solve the problems on the worksheet, the sharp tip of my pencil pierced through the paper. So, I used the narrow, elongated space of the protruding windowsill as a makeshift desk. Sitting upright facing the window, it was just at chest height. As I faced the setting sun, I continued solving the arithmetic problems. Eventually getting bored with studying, I rested my elbows on the windowsill and gazed outside. The room was on a hill, and from the window, I could overlook a residential area of intertwined old wooden houses. The setting sun was red on the distant roofs. I saw a child, with long shadows trailing behind, in the narrow alleyway below. The warmth of the evening sun made me drowsy. With a hazy mind, I played with the pencil, resting my elbows on the windowsill. There was a small bruise on my left arm. Idly, I poked it with the tip of the pencil, enjoying the needle-like sharpness and the somewhat pleasant pain.

Then, my right elbow slipped off the windowsill. It was so sudden that I couldn't react in time. A pain shot through my left arm. The tip of the pencil I was holding had pierced about five millimeters into my skin. Blood started to seep from the wound, trickling down the curvature of my arm. A red line formed on my white skin. I hurriedly tried to pull out the pencil... but then I stopped.

At first, only about five millimeters of the pencil's graphite tip was embedded. But somehow, the conically sharpened part had completely buried itself into my skin. I hadn't touched it. Yet, the pencil had penetrated deeper into the wound without me noticing. The pencil stuck in my left arm seemed to move on its own. It was as if it was being sucked in, burrowing deeper into my arm. The wound slightly widened. Another streak of blood flowed from the wound.

Confused, I hurriedly tried to pull the pencil out. I attempted to grasp the protruding part of the pencil with my right hand. But as if pulled by something inside, the pencil slipped further into my arm. I felt a long, rod-like object entering my arm. It felt like it was pushing aside my skin and muscles from the inside. I pressed down on my left arm with my fingers from the outside to confirm. There was definitely something pencil-like inside my body. The tip of my finger pressing on my arm could feel its bumps and irregularities. Initially, there was a throbbing discomfort. But as time passed, even that sensation faded. It was as if it had assimilated with my bones. In the four-and-a-half tatami room, dyed red by the setting sun, I sat facing the window and continued to stare at the wound on my arm. Eventually, the bleeding stopped, and the wound closed. Later, my mother returned and led me away from the window.

"You shouldn't be by the window for so long," she said.
Then she asked if I had seen anyone suspicious or if someone had knocked on our door. She always asked these questions when she came back from outside. I hid my left arm from my mother. I thought it would be bad if she found out about the pencil. Talking about how it was sucked into my arm would only make her worry. Even now, after having moved to Morioh, I sometimes press on my left arm with my fingertips, checking the rod-like sensation inside. There's no pain from the pencil being lodged inside, nor is there any restriction of movement. My left arm moved normally.
...However, there's something that concerns me. Ever since the pencil was sucked into my arm, I've been pressing various parts of my body with my fingertips to examine them. Inside my body, there were many inexplicable bumps and irregularities. Even as a child, I knew that under human skin there should be fat, muscles, bones, and the like. But inside my body, there were oddly angular things that couldn't be explained by just those. When I pressed my stomach, beyond the softness of my internal organs, I could feel the presence of some hard substance that was different from bone. I hadn't paid much attention to it until the incident with the pencil, but these hard substances were there, inside my arm and inside my leg. The shape of what I thought were bones was different on the left and right sides. For example, there's a slight protrusion on my right shin that isn't on the left. Just like with the pencil, might something have entered my body without my noticing? Might I have been

mistaking these hard sensations for bones all this time?
What in the world is happening to my body?
That's a question I've always kept thinking about.

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My mother and I moved to Morioh on June 1, 2000, a rainy day. My mother carried a sports bag and I had a backpack; each of us carried our own luggage as we got off the bus that day. The road in front of the station formed a circle with a pond in the center of the roundabout. The bus stop was near the pond, and the area seemed desolate and spacious. Perhaps it felt that way because there were few people outside due to the rain. The sky was covered with gray clouds, and raindrops quietly fell on the white paved ground, arranged in squares. As people quickly scattered from the bus stop to avoid the rain, and the bus drove away, only my mother and I remained. We didn't have an umbrella. To avoid the rain, we stepped under the roof of the bus shelter.
"Kaoru, which way do you think we should go?" my mother asked, looking around.
It was our first time in this place, so we didn't know which direction to walk in. Getting off at Morioh was not planned; until we got off the bus, we didn't even know the name of the town. We inferred it was Morioh because the bus stop was named "Morioh Station Front."

"Let's try going that way for now," my mother said, taking my hand and starting to walk, following her intuition.
My mother often started moving without deciding on a place to move to, leaving it to chance. Therefore, the first thing to do upon arriving in a new place was to find a place to live. For that, we needed to find a real estate agent who could help us find an apartment. If we were unlucky, we might end up spending the night in a family restaurant open late at night because we couldn't find a real estate agent. However, in Morioh, we were spared from such a fate. Shortly after walking from the station, we found a real estate agency that mediated apartments and condominiums.
When my mother and I entered the store, a middle-aged man in a suit came to assist us. The interior of the store had various floor plans of rooms posted on the walls. My mother spoke to the man across the counter.
"I'm looking for a cheap apartment where we can move in immediately and where they won't ask too many details," she said.
The man who came to assist us made a suspicious face upon

hearing my mother's request. I thought that was only natural.
"...It would be even better if no guarantor is needed," my mother added while trying to manage her rain-soaked hair. Droplets of water fell onto the counter.
"...Excuse me, but please bring an adult guardian if you're a minor," the man said, looking back and forth between my mother and me. Apparently, we were mistaken for a runaway sister and brother. It wasn't surprising to me as it happened all the time. My mother often looked younger than her actual age and was sometimes mistaken for a high school student. Because of that, there was a time when my mother and I, sleeping face down on a table in a family restaurant late at night, were nearly taken into custody by a passing police officer.
While pushing back her hair, my mother stopped her movement upon hearing the real estate agent's words. Droplets of water trickled down from the tips of her hair along her arm and dripped from her elbow. She made a displeased expression.
"I am twenty-six years old and this child's mother. This child is nine years old. Do you have a problem with that?" she said assertively, placing her hand on my head beside her. The man behind the counter looked down at me.
I was physically underdeveloped, and my height was much shorter than what would be expected for a nine-year-old. At best, I was the height of a five or six-year-old. This gap between my age and appearance might have seemed strange to the man. His eyes reflected a sense of oddity when looking at me. I felt crushed under his gaze. Both my mother and I had a complex about the gap between our ages and appearances. When pointed out, my mother would get angry. As for me, I would always look down in embarrassment.

"Could you not look at us like that?" my mother complained, hiding me behind her. "More importantly, we are looking for a place to live."
The man hesitated for a moment but eventually made a resigned face and made a phone call. Ten minutes later, my mother and I were led in front of a certain apartment building. After walking through a shopping street and down an alley from the station, we arrived at the building. My mother was holding an umbrella she had borrowed from the real estate agent. I was walking to her left,

sharing the umbrella with her. Both of our legs were wet, causing our trousers to cling to our bodies as we walked to the front of the apartment building. I was short, and my eye level reached only about my mother's waist. Her left hand, holding the umbrella, was positioned to keep me dry rather than herself.

As my mother slightly shifted the umbrella backward, my view expanded. In the scene where raindrops created thin lines, a huge white building stood, seemingly covering the gray sky. It had an unadorned appearance. It was a far more respectable building than where we had lived up until recently. We had even lived in places that would make a doghouse seem preferable.

"But this place seems expensive, doesn't it..." Without even seeing the room, my mother expressed her apprehension in a timid voice. We didn’t have much money.

"That won’t be a problem," the real estate agent had explained. The only room that met most of my mother's requirements at an affordable rate was in this one-room apartment building.

The entrance to the apartment was a square glass door. Pushing the silver handle and going through the heavy door, we finally got a respite from the rain. A middle-aged man, the landlord, appeared. He had a stern face and gave my mother and me a piercing look, sizing us up from head to toe. In a raspy voice, he asked my mother a few questions, to which she gave safe answers. Then we were led to the room.

The room was on the third floor, the sixth from the end. The door had a "306" plate on it. It was a clean room with a bath and toilet included. Although there was only one room, it was spacious enough for the two of us to live in. My mother repeatedly confirmed the rent with the landlord. Compared to the size and interior of the room, the rent quoted by the real estate agent was too cheap. I wondered if there might be a bomb or something planted in the room, and I carefully checked places like the underside of the toilet lid, but I couldn’t find anything suspicious.

My mother and I decided to live in that room. If we let this room go, we thought we might not find another room with a roof and walls at this price. My mother signed the documents brought by the landlord and stamped them with her seal. In the guarantor section, she wrote the name of the man who was not blood-related to her deceased husband. In other words, my father's stepfather. It seemed he was someone my mother had met only once, when my father died, and

he had helped with the funeral. He was apparently the only person willing to lend his name to my mother and me.
After the real estate agent and landlord left, my mother and I collapsed for a while in the unfurnished, stark room. Then my mother took out an alarm clock and a glass jar from the

sports bag she had brought. These were items she always carried with her when moving. They were apparently from the house we used to live in. The alarm clock was old and sometimes went off at times other than the set time. The glass jar was large and transparent, apparently once containing blueberry jam. The label was still attached, and it was filled with one-yen and five-yen coins to about a quarter of its height. No matter how unfamiliar the place we moved to, the moment we placed these items, it felt like the territory of my mother and me.
"I might come to like this town. We were lucky to find such a room within half a day of arriving," my mother said, stretching while lying on the floor. In the room without furniture, her voice echoed well against the walls. My mother was simply happy, but I felt something unsettling. For instance, I wondered if the room might have a history, like someone died in it or it was haunted.
I found out later that I was right. About a year ago, a young woman who had lived in this room had gone missing with her boyfriend. There was a rumor that they had been attacked by a burglar. As a result, the landlord of the apartment had replaced the doors and locks of all the rooms with new ones. However, since then, no one wanted to live in room "306" anymore, which was why the rent was so cheap. But that had nothing to do with my mother or me, and anyway, that day we celebrated our move by eating a giant frozen pizza.
Life in Morioh began. The room, devoid of furniture, remained that way for a while. We didn’t even have futons, but we each carried a sleeping bag, which we laid on the hard floor to sleep. Both my mother and I had become accustomed to hard sleeping surfaces.
"I think if I lay down on a soft bed right now, I might feel like I'm drowning and won't be able to sleep," my mother often joked. It was early summer, so even just the sleeping bags weren't too cold. My mother and I had even had to sleep outside in the middle of winter once. Compared to that time, we didn’t feel our lives were in danger. That was last winter. At a rural bus stop, my mother and I

missed the last bus. There were no houses around, and the only thing at the bus stop was a modest old wooden shelter, which was almost laughable. We sat huddled together, wrapping our bodies in our sleeping bags, but every time the wind blew, our body heat would decrease. Snow began to fall, and my mother's lips turned bluish-purple. If someone hadn't happened to pass by and helped us, two frozen bodies with icicles hanging from their noses would have been found the next morning.

The day after moving, my mother immediately started looking for a job. If she didn't earn some money, we would be kicked out of the hard-won room. In the meantime, I was made to study at home. I had to finish the worksheets my mother gave me before she came home. The worksheets were copies of a problem book my mother had somehow obtained. Initially, the problems were simple, but they became more difficult day by day. Still, as long as I referred to the textbooks, I could solve them.

Eventually, my mother got a job at a place called "Kameyu Department Store," not far from the apartment. So, every day, she left home early. During the day, my mother was always worried about me being alone in the room. However, I was more worried about her because she was hypersensitively paranoid. Everything seemed like an enemy to her. For instance, just seeing a

man approaching from the front on the road made her brace herself. She would move me behind her back to protect me and wouldn't relax until the man had passed by. Because she was always like that, my mother wasn't proactive in socializing. In all the places we had moved to before, she had mostly refused contact with neighbors. She wouldn't carelessly open the door if it was knocked on. She would ask for the name and reason for visiting, check the visitor's ID, and only then open the door. Near the door, there was a metal bat picked up from the roadside, placed there by my mother in case of an attack from an enemy. So far, no such enemy had come to visit us.

When walking, even a tricycle with a child on it or a newspaper sliding in the wind would make my mother stop and concentrate her nerves.

"It might be an enemy attack," she would say.

Although my mother never tired of saying such incomprehensible things, it made me, her son, somewhat anxious.

Near the apartment, there was a school called "Budogaoka Elementary School." In the morning and evening, I would see children with backpacks passing by the roads near the apartment. It was when my mother and I were returning from shopping together that we encountered a group of elementary school students and passed them on the road. At that moment, my mother's gaze was directed toward the children, who were laughing and frolicking with their friends, carrying black backpacks.

According to my mother, I used to carry a backpack and go to elementary school too. That was before we started moving around so much when we lived in a single-family home with my father.

"It was tough every morning. Waking you and your father up, making breakfast…" My mother had a nostalgic look on her face. I don't remember living in that house. Therefore, I can't recall going to elementary school. Almost all the elementary school students passing in front of me were taller than me. It was a little hard to believe that I was once among them.

"You used to bring back your communication log book every day. It was written in messy handwriting, the things you needed to take to school the next day. At that time, Kaoru, you were in the first grade."

"I don't remember…"

"That's right..."

Three years ago, I lost my memory. Therefore, all I remember is our current life of moving around with my mother. I don't know anything about any other lifestyle. I know the phrase "communication log book," but I don't know how I used it. Seeing my mother reminisce with narrowed eyes made me feel suffocated.

The oldest memory I can recall is a scene where I'm riding in a car with someone. I'm sitting in the passenger seat. A man is sitting in the driver's seat next to me, holding the steering wheel. It was raining, and the wipers were wiping the front windshield. I found their movements interesting and watched them for a long time. When I got bored with that, I looked outside the window. It seemed to be night, and everything was dark. The light from the streetlights crossed through the darkness, and it was beautiful. Eventually, the car stopped, and the man said something to me. I don't remember what he said. Although I have a good memory now and remember

unnecessary things, the words he said at that time weren't engraved in my mind. It was as if I had heard a language I couldn't understand. Then the man touched my head and looked sad. I think that man was probably my father.
"According to my mother, after that, the car was in a traffic accident. My father got out of the car, shielding me. Thanks to him, I was unharmed, but my father was seriously injured. My mind was in chaos, and I don't remember the accident. But I remember a little about the hospital where my father was taken. It must have been just before he was taken to the operating room. I can remember the sight of my father lying on the bed. He looked in pain and seemed to hardly see anything. The police were there, talking to my father in such a condition. They were probably trying to find out the cause and circumstances of the accident. My mother and I were watching from a distance. Near my face, my mother's hand dangled lifelessly. I reached out to touch it half-unconsciously, but my mother quickly withdrew her hand. She leaned against the wall of the corridor, her face pale. She must have been distraught. My father was taken to the hospital and immediately underwent surgery. He passed away during the procedure.
What did my father talk to me about in the car? I remember the moment his lips moved, and he made a sound. Why did he look so sad? I wanted to remember what my father said. It felt like he told me something important. It felt like my father and I had made an important promise. Whenever I start thinking about it, I can't stay calm. I become restless, not knowing whether to stand or sit. A deep part of my chest starts to ache, and I feel like I had something I needed to do.
Sometimes, I wish my father was still alive. This happens when I wake up in the middle of the night. I look to the side, and in the dark room, my mother is sitting up, only her feet tucked into the sleeping bag. She holds her knees and quietly ponders. I can see well in the dark, so I can see my mother's face. I pretend not to see and close my eyes, praying to God to let me fall asleep quickly. And then I think how nice it would be if my father were alive and with us.
My mother was always scared. She lived her life always on guard. I didn't know exactly what my mother was so afraid of before. However, there was something specific, not just a mere fear, that defined her actions.
"Kaoru, someone might come to you someday..."

It was a winter night a year ago, when we were forced to sleep at a bus stop in the snow. While her voice trembled with cold, my mother muttered. There were no houses around, just the darkness of the night. There was an old streetlamp nearby, its light cutting through the night in a

cone shape, illuminating the ground in a circle. The falling snow wasn't visible in the darkness but only revealed itself when it entered the light and was absorbed into the ground. It was such a quiet night that the sound of the falling snow seemed audible.
The bus stop shelter was made of old wood. There was a bench with dry leaves on it, and we sat there, huddled together. The shelter's windbreak walls and roof were all on the verge of collapsing. Yet, it felt significantly warmer than outside.
"Who? What kind of person?" I was cold too, but not as badly fatigued as my mother.
"I don’t know. I don’t know their face or anything. I don’t know when they will stand in front of you…"
My mother said that as if she was foreseeing the near future, her lips pale and trembling.
"Will I die then?" I asked. My mother looked into my eyes and fell silent, as if in thought.
"I don't know what will happen..."
She probably spoke like that because she thought we might die from the cold. Before that, she felt she had to tell me about that person, the one she feared. We had been moving from place to place to escape from that individual.
Ten minutes later, a car happened to pass by the road. We were on the verge of freezing to death, but the lady driving the car rescued us and took us in to stay at her house.
Since then, the story of the mysterious person was occasionally mentioned. Perhaps once my mother had spoken about it, she thought it couldn't be helped. She never took back her words, never said it was just a joke. Someday, this man will appear before me. His face, everything about him is unknown. Yet, he's definitely somewhere in Japan, chasing after me and my mother. Whether it will be in a few hours or in a dozen years, that's uncertain. Faced with such vague information, all I could do was let my imagination run wild.

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The first time I met a man named Josuke Higashikata was on June 20th. At that time, I didn't know his name yet and only recognized him as a high school student with a distinctive hairstyle, identifiable by his black school uniform. Despite it being the season when summer was about to arrive in Morioh, the long-sleeved shirt and long pants seemed hot. But on reflection, I don't recall ever wearing such a school uniform myself. Perhaps it's cooler to wear than it appears from the outside.

Josuke Higashikata doesn't play a deeply central role in this story. When I calmly reflect later, this story is just about the events that occurred between me, my mother, and that person. He is merely at the periphery of the tale; Josuke Higashikata doesn’t move. However, without the person called Josuke Higashikata, there would have definitely been a different outcome. He wasn't at the center, but at least to me, he seemed to shine with a strong light. He was still there as one of the important pieces that formed the story.

In the evening, I was walking through the shopping district. As I walked along the edge of the street, I found myself unconsciously touching my left arm with my right hand's fingers, searching for the irregular, rod-like bumps inside my body. I remember well when the pencil pierced through a bruise into my body. I often recall it and ponder over the abnormalities in my body.

Why did that happen? If I press my skin and don't feel the rod-like sensation inside, I could write it off as a dream. But, unfortunately, the fingers touching my left arm confirm the reality that the pencil is still inside my body.

Because I was walking with my head down, I wasn't paying attention to what was ahead of me. Suddenly, I collided with something. A moment later, I realized I had bumped into a person. I was thrown back and landed on my bottom on the cobblestone pavement. Between my thrown-out legs, a wooden box about the size of an armful fell. The box, beautifully white and tied with red string to prevent the lid from opening, seemed to belong to the person I collided with. When it hit the pavement, something inside the box made a sound like it had broken.

I didn’t get hurt much. However, from the sound inside the box, I understood that I had done something terrible. Still sitting on the ground, I looked up at the person I had collided with. It was a

middle-aged man wearing a suit. His face turned pale, and he picked up the box and gently shook it. The sound of small fragments rattling inside was loud and clear.
I wanted to run away. But I'm slow. He would surely catch me soon. Imagining being caught and scolded while trying to flee made me incredibly embarrassed, and I thought it would be better to apologize right there. I stood up and bowed to the man in front of me.
"…I'm sorry," I said, my voice trembling with fear.

The man bent his knees to bring his eyes to the same level as mine. He didn't look particularly angry; rather, he seemed more concerned about me. I felt slightly relieved.
"Are you hurt, kid…?" he asked.
I replied that I was fine.
"That's good. But you shouldn't walk while being distracted…"
With that, he pressed the wooden box he was holding in his right hand forcefully against my face. The corner of the box felt like it was piercing into my cheek. Any attempt to escape was futile. He grabbed my hair powerfully with his left hand. If I tried to escape forcefully, it felt like the skin on my head would tear off. I looked up at the man's face from beside the box pressed against me. The concerned expression he had for me had completely changed. I froze when I saw his face.
The man began to rant loudly. He explained that the box contained an expensive vase, and he was in the middle of transporting it. His intense voice sounded like an explosion right by my ear.
"But…" I wanted to make some excuse, but it was clearly my fault.
The man's shouting caused many of the passersby to turn around. However, they never stopped or slowed down to watch. They glanced sideways, gave me a pitying look, and then passed by.
With the box pressed against my cheek, I was breathless with shame and fear. "Kaoru...!" The last voice I wanted to hear called out from behind me. With my head pinned by the box, I turned towards the voice. My mother was running towards me from the direction of the department store. The shopping street was a path connecting the department store and our apartment. She must have spotted me on her way back home. "Did my child do something wrong?" As my mother approached, she wedged her arm between me and the man and pulled us apart. The man

released me without resistance, but I didn't feel relieved.
The man scrutinized my mother with an intrusive gaze. "Did you just say 'my child'?" he asked. "Yes, this child is mine," my mother replied, looking straight into the middle-aged man's eyes. Like the police officer who tried to guide us at the family restaurant and the real estate agent, the man probably thought my mother was my older sister or something similar.
The man put the wooden box on the ground and explained the situation to my mother. He told her that he was transporting the contents of the wooden box to a client and that I had suddenly bumped into him. His face came close, trying to intimidate me and my mother.
Perhaps unable to withstand the man's anger, my mother averted her gaze from his face, looked down at me, and her expression fell. The man, seeing her expression, twisted his mouth into a smirk that seemed to take pleasure in his anger-filled demeanor.

"...I understand, we'll pay for the damages," my mother said, bowing her head. I felt terrible for making her do that. But the man's anger didn't seem to subside, and he hurled harsh words at me and my mother. As always, my mother didn't retort.
Throughout our constant moving from place to place, we had often been spoken to unpleasantly. My mother would just stay silent, hiding me behind her back, closing her eyes, and silently enduring the words. Each time, it felt as if my mother was being slowly cut by a small blade.
I couldn't look directly at the man's face and hid behind my mother, only looking at our feet. On the cobblestone pavement, my and my mother's shoes faced the man's leather shoes. My shoes looked foolishly small compared to the man's leather shoes, like a toy or something. That saddened me.
The wooden box was placed beside the man's shoes. Suddenly, a shadow fell on it. It was neither the shadow of the middle-aged man nor my mother's. Someone who had gone unnoticed by everyone up to that point had apparently approached from a distance. That person crouched down beside the box and gently extended their right hand...
Neither my mother nor the middle-aged man initially noticed the presence of the person who had approached. When that person bent down and picked up the box, the middle-aged man finally

stopped berating my mother and turned in that direction. My mother saw it almost simultaneously.
"Been listening for a while now, but before talking about compensation, shouldn't you check the contents of the box first?" the person said as they stood up and offered the box to the man. It was a man wearing a black school uniform, probably a high school student on his way home from school. The person, who stood tall, seemed like a gigantic building to me. From the shape of the school uniform and the posture, it was evident that the person was a delinquent. The language was polite, but the way of speaking was drawn out.
"There's no need to open it to know the contents..." The middle-aged man in the suit, while looking skeptically at the high school student who suddenly appeared and joined the conversation, took the wooden box offered to him and shook it up and down. However, the loud noise of small fragments colliding with each other, heard earlier, was not heard this time. The man's face, previously filled with anger, now wore a dumbfounded expression. I probably had a similar look on my face.
The lid was opened. Inside was not a pile of shattered fragments. The vase that the man took out of the box didn't even have a crack. The man tilted his head and looked at me, my mother, and the high school student in the school uniform, making a face as if he didn't understand what was happening.
"See, just let it go," the high school boy said, hands in his pockets, as he looked down at the man crouching with the vase. My mother squeezed my hand tightly. I looked up to see my mother's face, relieved to the point of tears, as she saw the unbroken vase.

"We'll be going now..." My mother said as she pulled my hand, trying to quickly leave the scene, probably not wanting to stand out too much.
"Wait, Mom!" I called out, trying to stop her, but she firmly pulled my hand. At that moment, something that caught my eye for just a second concerned me.
It was the moment the high school student reached out to touch the wooden box on the ground. His hand seemed to double, split apart, and it looked as if a third arm had sprouted. The arm was translucent and seemed to pass through the wooden box from left

to right, then suddenly disappeared.
I shook off my mother's hand and looked back at the confused middle-aged man holding the vase and the high school student in the school uniform. Both of them were no longer interested in us. Still, because we were close, I could hear their conversation.
"I don't really understand, but well, I guess it's alright..." the middle-aged man murmured in a soulless voice, then turned his face towards the high school student.
"I should at least thank you… Thanks." Then he stared intently at the high school student's head. The student's hair was styled in a distinctive shape. It was too peculiar to describe properly, an over-the-top style pointing in a certain direction, and the middle-aged man seemed to think so too. Pointing at the hairstyle, the man said it was funny. A moment later, the man disappeared from sight. There was an explosive sound, and the glass of a nearby luxury boutique's show window shattered into pieces. Fragments flew around, dancing on the cobblestone. Only the man's legs were sticking out from the destroyed show window of the store. The vase he was holding also fell to the cobblestone, scattering pieces all over the street.
The high school student took a comb out of his pocket and began fixing his hair. The gentleness in his eyes from before was gone, replaced by a fierce atmosphere. He seemed to be angry.
"Kaoru...!" While turning back to see what happened behind me, my mother's face turned pale as she pulled my hand. I could feel her intention to quickly flee the scene through her grip.
"Mom, look, next to that person..." While being pulled by one hand, I pointed behind with the other.
"...There's something next to that person! Can't you see?! When he punched, the man was blown away!" Next to the high school student stood a powerful, statue-like figure as if hugging him. That figure, which hadn't existed until now, appeared as if it emerged from the shadow of the high school student and had punched the man away. The third arm I saw for a moment from the high school student was probably the arm of that figure. But where had it been hiding until now? For a moment, it appeared translucent, like an illusion.
It seemed that my voice reached the high school student. He stopped fixing his hair and turned his gaze towards me. People from the store emerged in a confused state, onlookers started gathering, and the

surroundings became noisy. Amid the crowd, partially obstructed, we locked

eyes. He didn't remove his gaze fixed on me, even as I was pulled away by my mother. He didn't say anything but looked surprised.
"Could you see that?" It felt like he was saying that in his mind. Eventually, the crowd that had gathered obstructed our view, and we lost sight of each other. He didn't follow me and my mother, and my mother, without looking back, left the scene. The only ones left were the onlookers rushing in the opposite direction of me and my mother, drawn by the commotion and noise of the shopping street.
My mother remained silent until we reached the apartment. As soon as we entered, she immediately locked the door. After making sure I wasn't injured, she hugged me tightly. I could feel her trembling through her arms.

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The vase inside the wooden box was definitely supposed to be broken. When the box was shaken, the sound of small fragments could be heard. Yet, when the lid was opened, the vase was not broken. Why is that? Both the middle-aged man in the suit and I believed the contents of the box were broken, so were we hearing an auditory hallucination of the fragments?
At first, I desperately tried to explain what I saw to my mother. However, she dismissed it as "just a misperception" and didn't take it seriously.
To my mother, and probably to all the people present at the scene, the man who appeared next to the high school student was not visible. When the middle-aged man was blown away, the onlookers' gazes seemed to pass right through the man. Was it a hallucination visible only to me? The man who stood close to the high school student appeared almost like a shadow reflected on water, without a physical presence, as if the image of a person standing elsewhere was projected into the air.
I encountered the high school student again the next day. The day after the incident with the vase, I left my room in the afternoon. I put on my shoes, opened the heavy glass door of the apartment entrance, and stepped outside. Thin, silk-like clouds hung in the sky. There was a slight breeze, and looking

back at the apartment, I saw the laundry hung on many balconies swaying.
I walked through the shopping street and went to the place where yesterday's incident occurred. The high-end boutique with the shattered show window was not open. The surrounding area had been roughly cleaned, but the window was not fitted with glass, only covered with a plastic sheet. Looking closely at the cobblestone ground, I found small fragments of glass scattered around.
I thought about going into the convenience store, Owson. While walking towards the store, suddenly someone tripped me, and I fell. As a result, my cheek hit the paving stone on the sidewalk, sending a spark-like pain through my head.

Several pairs of shoes crossed in front of me as I lay fallen and groaning. Looking up, I saw four people surrounding me, all wearing black school uniforms, and I realized they were high school students. Just one look was enough to tell they were troublemakers. I looked up at the four of them while sitting on the ground.
The central figure among them, a man with an oddly shaped nose, crouched down and spoke to me with a menacing expression and tone. Summarizing his words, he demanded the pocket money I received from my mother, supposedly to be sent to underprivileged children abroad. However, their real purpose seemed not the money, but to enjoy scaring me.
As I rubbed my aching cheek on the ground, I felt like crying. Frightened and shrinking back, I thought, 'Again, after yesterday?'
It was then that I heard a voice from behind. "Hey, isn't that the guy from yesterday?" I turned around to see the high school student with the distinctive hairstyle standing there. He had a bag under his arm and both hands shoved in his pockets. Apparently, 'that guy' referred to me. His gaze was fixed on me.
The four high school students who had been surrounding me with a threatening demeanor turned pale upon seeing him. As soon as he spoke to me, they quickly changed their attitude and scurried away, visibly nervous.
"...Damn, I should have waited and watched a bit longer before calling out. If I had, maybe you would have felt the danger and your Stand could have appeared," the high school student said, watching the four leave.
Stand. For a moment, I thought he was talking about an

electric lamp stand. I stood frozen, looking up as he approached. He was taller than the four who had just left.
"Hey, you can see it, right? This," he said, pointing behind him with his thumb raised. When I looked closely, I saw another person standing behind him. There definitely wasn't anyone approaching with him, but suddenly this man was standing close by his side. It was the same person who had punched the middle-aged man yesterday.
There was a large park in the center of Morioh, different from the small parks with just a few modest playsets and sandboxes scattered among the residential areas. This park had a deep forest that seemed like it could swallow two or three children without a sound.
Inside the park was a large pond inhabited by carps and ducks, surrounded by a lawn with strangely shaped monuments lined up. Around the pond was a running track where you could often see people jogging, their shirts soaked with sweat from the collar down to the chest.
"You might be able to produce a Stand," Josuke said about three minutes into the park, next to some shrubbery. That was his name, Josuke Higashikata. There were a few people in the park, but the short trees, like clumps of leaves, isolated us from the surroundings. Josuke, throwing

his thin-soled school shoes aside, crouched down and spoke as if we were in a secret base having a secret conversation.
"Kaoru, you don't know what this is, do you?" Next to Josuke, another person crouched down in the same manner appeared. It was the person who had been standing behind Josuke. He had disappeared somewhere while we moved to the park and then suddenly reappeared. It was unclear how he appeared, as if from the air, or as if Josuke's body doubled and the other half was not Josuke, but on closer inspection, it was him. Once seen, it seemed as if he had always been there.
"...I, I don't know," I shook my head and slowly backed away while sitting on the ground, moving away from Josuke. "Don't be stupid, don't run away," Josuke said, and the person who had appeared from the air moved. Despite his large build, he was terrifyingly agile and moved smoothly. He approached like gliding through the air,

swiftly grabbed my leg with efficient motion, and pulled me right in front of Josuke's nose. Josuke remained crouched and unmoving the whole time.
"This is called a Stand. It's something like my guardian spirit," he explained.
Pointing at the figure holding my leg, Josuke explained about the Stand. The Stand... Indeed, my ankle felt an undeniable pressure where it was held. No matter how much I tried to shake it off, it wouldn't budge, as if I was dealing with a mass of steel. Yet, I could sense that it was holding back, gently gripping my leg. The Stand didn't seem to be acting on its own thoughts but was apparently holding my leg following Josuke's command.
"…Seeing this means you might possess this ability too," Josuke said. He taught me about Stands. A Stand is apparently akin to a guardian spirit or a shadowy figure. It's like the life energy of a person manifested in a physical form.
"Life energy?" I asked.
"Like a soul. Look, there's something like psychic abilities, right? The ones where people can move objects without touching them. Think of it as if that power has become visible."
Occasionally, there are people who can freely summon and control their Stands. These people are called Stand users.
I got a close look at Josuke's Stand. Each Stand has its name, and Josuke's Stand is called Crazy Diamond. Its appearance is that of a muscular and robust man, like a gladiator from the ancient arenas. I rubbed my eyes, but the figure didn't disappear. It seemed to glow faintly from within and stood there distinctly and clearly. Hesitantly, I reached out my fingers to touch its thick arm. However, my fingers sank into it without any resistance, as if plunging into a mass of smoke.
"A Stand can only be touched by another Stand. It's okay if you touch it consciously, though," Josuke informed me.

Crazy Diamond turned its head to look at me. It towered over me, intimidating. It moved its massive arm and gently touched the tip of my outstretched finger. This time, I felt a solid sensation. It was hard as concrete, and I sensed that if that fist were to punch me, it could be fatal. The surface was smooth, without any blemishes or stains, like a moving plaster statue.
"Stand users can see the Stands summoned by others," Josuke

said, beckoning me closer. I knelt down on the ground beside him, matching his crouched posture. He leaned in close to me as if he was about to discuss something serious.

"Listen. The fact that Stand users can see others' Stands means the opposite is also true. You get what I'm saying?" I shook my head in confusion.

"In other words, if you can see someone else's Stand, it might mean you're a Stand user yourself. Hey, if you can see Crazy Diamond, it means…" There's a possibility that I might be a Stand user too. Josuke declared this calmly. It took me three seconds to grasp what that meant.

"So, I might be able to summon something like this too?" I asked.

"You speak very politely for a child," Josuke noted as he pointed at Crazy Diamond. "As for your question, the answer is 'exactly'," he affirmed, adding, "But it's not exactly the same thing." According to him, each Stand has a different appearance, depending on the person who wields it. People with beautiful souls have beautiful-looking Stands, while those with vile souls possess vile-looking Stands.

"Moreover, the abilities they possess differ too... Listen, Stands have special powers. For instance, my Stand can restore broken things to their original state," Josuke explained.

Crazy Diamond picked up a leaf that had fallen on the ground, pinched it between its fingers, and showed it to me. While I could see the Stand, for those who couldn't, the leaf would appear to be floating in mid-air.

Crazy Diamond opened its fingers and released the leaf. I thought the leaf would fall to the ground, but the opposite happened. Silently, the leaf ascended, as if pulled by an invisible string, heading towards the sky. It brushed against a nearby branch, spun around, and slid along the branch. Eventually, it reached the tip of the branch and stopped moving. It didn't just stick to the branch; it swayed with the wind like the countless other leaves around it.

"That leaf originally belonged there," Josuke explained. "It fell off, and I just fixed it."

The leaf, once detached from the branch and fallen to the ground, had been restored to its original place. It was like witnessing a miracle, and I felt a surge of excitement. The vase in the box that was unbroken two days ago had also been discreetly repaired by Josuke's Stand.

"However, I can't revive things that are already dead…" Josuke added.

Standing near the tree, I watched the leaf sway in the wind for a while. The leaf, which had been dull on the ground until a moment ago, was now shimmering, filtering the sunlight. I squinted because of the brightness.
"Hey, Kaoru," Josuke called out. I turned to him, and suddenly, Crazy Diamond was nowhere to be seen. Josuke had a serious look as he gazed into my eyes.
"You can see Stands. But, you know, that's a 'delicate' thing. I'm not sure if it's good or bad. You might end up involved in some dangerous situations."
I swallowed nervously, but then Josuke's expression brightened.
"If anything happens, contact this address," he said, handing me a piece of paper from his pocket.
'"Morioh, Jozenji 1..."' It had an address and a phone number, presumably Josuke's home.
I repeatedly glanced at the paper with the address as I walked home from Josuke's place. I passed through the shopping district of Morioh and by the store that Crazy Diamond had destroyed. Workers were just fitting new glass into the shattered show window.
The thought that I might possess a powerful and special ability like Josuke's Stand excited me. It was something I deeply desired. Until now, I had no way to defend myself; I always just hid behind my mother. If I had power, how great would that be? If I could protect myself with a Stand, I would no longer be just someone who needs protection. My mother wouldn't have to live in constant fear and anxiety.
As the day waned and the sky began to redden, telephone wires cast black lines against the sky. Leaving the bustling shopping district, I entered a quieter alley. The tall buildings on both sides cast the street in shadow.
As I walked, my initial excitement gave way to calmness. Could I really produce a Stand? Concern began to creep into my heart. Being able to see Stands didn't necessarily mean that I could manifest one myself. I had never managed to summon anything like Crazy Diamond from within me.
I touched my cheek as I walked. It still hurt from when I was tripped

and fell, face-first, onto the pavement. There wasn't a cut, but it might bruise. If I had a bruise on my right cheek, my mother would be distressed. She was always extremely concerned whenever I got hurt.

Suddenly, I stopped walking. Touching the sore spot on my cheek, I noticed something odd.

Under the skin on my face, there was something small, right around the cheekbone. I pressed and pinched it through the skin with my index finger and thumb. It was hard, about two centimeters in diameter, and shaped like a thin disc. It wasn't fixed in place; the small object

moved just beneath the skin of my face. I thought perhaps a part of my facial bone had crumbled when I fell, but it was definitely not bone. It was too perfectly disc-shaped.

I wondered if various things had entered my body without my knowledge. Ever since I witnessed the pencil being absorbed into my left arm, I had been haunted by such thoughts. I had never noticed anything foreign in my face before, but perhaps, when I fell, something had moved from a different part of my body or something stuck to the bone had come loose.

Confused, I confirmed the presence of the small object near my right cheekbone with my fingers. When I pressed it towards my mouth, it stopped near the upper jaw. I also pressed it towards my eye, thinking it might be possible to remove it from the inside of my eyelid. When moved, I could definitely feel the sensation of a small, hard object crawling beneath the skin. When it reached right near my right eye, I felt a slight pressure against the eyeball from the inside of the skin. Scared, I stopped.

The various foreign objects in my body might be related to the Stand. If my physical abnormalities were related to the ability of my Stand... For instance, there might have been times when I unconsciously activated my Stand while half-asleep.

Suddenly, I wanted to know what the object beneath my skin was. Unraveling what was inside my body seemed crucial to determining whether I had a Stand. With that thought, I made up my mind.

I took out my keys, opened the entrance door marked with "306," and confirmed that my mother hadn't returned from the department store yet. The prints I had solved in the afternoon were left on the low table, just as I had left the room.

Opening my pencil case, I took out a cutter knife and headed to the washbasin. However, I couldn't look directly into the mirror due to my height. I moved a cardboard box filled with old books to use as a step. It was something my mother had brought from somewhere.
Standing on the box, I confronted my reflection in the mirror. I pressed on the area near my right cheek, feeling the small lump beneath the skin. There was a hard sensation at my fingertips, and it slid beneath the skin when pressed. Looking at my face in the mirror, there was no visible abnormality. The slight bulge was too subtle to be seen through the skin.
With my left index and middle fingers, I held the small sensation on my right cheek in place. Slightly extending the blade of the cutter knife in my right hand, I brought it close to my cheek. The light from the washbasin fixture reflected off the blade. My hand gripping the handle and my face began to sweat.
I pricked the skin of my face with the tip of the knife blade, just a few millimeters deep, right beneath the small sensation I was holding with my left hand. A sharp pain shot through, making me want to cry. In the mirror, I saw a drop of red well up from the spot where the blade had pierced, forming a sphere as it trickled down my cheek.

I dragged the knife sideways, creating a red line on my cheek. It felt more like heat than pain. When the cut was made, my right hand trembled, and I dropped the cutter knife into the washbasin. It clattered and rolled, stopping just before the drain. Red dripped onto the white basin. Honestly, I'm not used to seeing blood, but I was relieved that the flow was less than I had anticipated.
Carefully not to fall off the box I was standing on, I leaned in closer to the mirror to inspect the wound. The skin was split. With my left index finger, I pushed the hard sensation beneath the skin toward the wound. The upper edge of the cut slightly bulged. Something was visible in the depths. I leaned in even closer to the mirror. Until then, only red was visible deep in the wound. Suddenly, from beneath the bulging skin, something shiny like the surface of metal peeked out. It shone like metal, but the moment I noticed it, it slipped smoothly through the wound and emerged outside.
It fell into the washbasin, making a light, small sound, and rolled,

almost falling into the drain. I quickly reached out with my right hand and grabbed it. Slowly opening my clenched right hand, what had been moving beneath my skin and had just popped out, appeared. It was a small golden disc, resembling a coin from some country. It had been beneath my skin, so its surface was thinly coated with red blood. Yet, it still reflected the light from the washbasin, shining brilliantly.

Unlike a Stand, which has no physical form, it definitely had weight and substance. The blood on the coin's surface quickly dried and became sticky. However, forgetting to wash the blood off or disinfect the wound on my cheek, I stood transfixed in front of the mirror, staring at the coin.

I couldn't tell which side was the front and which was the back. On one side, there was a sun, and on the other, the profile of a woman in relief. There was a scratch on the edge of the coin. Perhaps it was made when I was tripped by the delinquents earlier that day, when the coin hit the ground through my skin. But it also looked like a scratch made by a blade.

I stared at my own small hand, as small as a baby's. In my hand, the coin collected light from the lamp and shone, as if numerous tiny stars were affixed to its surface.

■ 3 ■

Why was a gold coin inside me? The coin had a scratch, conveying the sense that it had a long history before ending up in my hands. It was a far-fetched idea, but suppose I had a Stand ability to produce gold coins inside my body. If that were the case, the coins that emerged would surely not bear the marks of time. They would appear brand new, freshly minted. But since that wasn't the case, it meant there wasn't a factory inside me minting gold coins. The coin was trapped inside me at some point in the past, perhaps similarly to how the pencil was absorbed into my left arm. The other foreign objects inside me must have undergone a similar process. But was this coin authentic? I had no expertise in appraisal, but it didn't seem like a cheap counterfeit coin, just plastic coated with gold plating.

Right after I extracted the coin from my cheek, my mother returned from work. She usually comes home temporarily in the evening to feed me, as we are a mother-child household. Her workplace at Kameyu Department Store apparently allowed this. I had washed

away the blood in the washbasin and cleverly concealed the wound on my cheek, so she didn't seem to notice.
"If you're hungry, don't wait for me. Go ahead and eat dinner. I have a little appointment with friends today, so I might be late. I'm sorry," she said apologetically, bowing slightly before returning to the department store. It seems she's doing well at work and has even made some friends.
At that time, I had washed the blood off the coin and hid it deep in my backpack. The cut I made with the cutter knife on my cheek ached for a while but eventually closed up, leaving a red line.
I often encountered Josuke around town. He was always very noticeable, even from a distance. He carried an aura different from ordinary people, making it easy to spot him in a crowd. It's hard to describe what makes someone's aura different from the norm. I later heard that Josuke has foreign blood, half of it, to be precise. Indeed, his facial features seemed more Western, with a deeper sculpt than most Japanese people. But the atmosphere he emitted seemed to be due to more than just being half-Japanese.
"Hey, Kaoru," I heard his voice from behind while I was browsing magazines at the Owson convenience store. Turning around, I saw Josuke approaching with one hand raised.

"Checking out manga?" he asked, peering at the magazine I was holding. His height towered over mine, so he had to bend nearly at a right angle. His face came close to the magazine, and inevitably, mine too. I pulled my head back slightly to avoid being poked by his bangs.
I was reading a page of a manga I liked at the moment. For some reason, Josuke seemed to grimace slightly at that page.
"That manga... it was on hiatus last year, wasn't it?"
"Oh, yes. I was wondering what happened. My mom is also a fan of this manga. During the hiatus, we were both worried that the author got into a traffic accident," I said.
Josuke averted his eyes and responded awkwardly, "Oh, oh… I see" I didn't know at the time that the author of the manga lived in Morioh and that the series had gone on hiatus because Josuke had once beaten him up.
Once you talk to Josuke, you realize he's a kind-hearted person with polite speech and a friendly expression. However, there's an

air of indecision about whether it's okay to casually strike up a conversation with him when he walks silently, hands in the pockets of his school uniform. Perhaps it's a kind of imposing presence and nobility not found in ordinary people. In other words, he's like a lion. His presence in the crowd of Morioh is like a lion lost among a group of dogs and cats.

Sometimes his behavior is foolishly childlike, but there are moments when a noble light glimmers in his eyes. Yet, like a lion, he also possesses a ferocious side. He harbors both kindness and ferocity at once, but the balance is unstable and precarious. For instance, like when he suddenly lashed out and shattered the showroom window, his violent side can emerge in an instant. This dual nature is reflected in his Stand, Crazy Diamond, which has the gentle, "salvific" power to repair broken things, yet also harbors the chilling strength to bring destruction.

Talking with Josuke was enjoyable. Since my mother was the only person I usually talked to, every word I heard from him felt fresh and new. For the past three years, I've been moving around so much that I hardly had time to get close to anyone. At most, I was recognized by the staff at the convenience store I often visited to kill time.

There was only one exception. A miracle happened, and I met a child about my age, just once. It was two years ago when I was seven. At that time, there wasn't much gap between my age and appearance; I was just a bit small for a seven-year-old. I didn't realize how slowly I was growing, so I was able to talk to people without shame or fear. I met that child on a slide in the park and we climbed the jungle gym together. Perhaps the child had no friends, as they always killed time in the park after school. We started playing together, and I even went to that child's house once. But after leaving the town, it ended there. I soon forgot their face and can't even remember their hairstyle. Although I'm good at quickly remembering what I read in books, my memory of that child's face is as vague as a blurred photo.

I wonder if I'll forget Josuke's face once I leave Morioh. At least, he'll probably forget about me soon enough. That's understandable. To Josuke, I'm just a presence that occasionally wanders around his feet when we encounter each other in town. I haven't told him about the gold coin

coming out of my cheek or the pencil getting stuck in my

arm. Not even my real age. He probably thinks I'm about six years old, based on my appearance.
Confiding these things would take courage on my part. I worried about being seen as strange or having a wild imagination, and such fears lead me down a maze of timid thoughts. Nevertheless, making acquaintances in Morioh has been enjoyable for me.
"Kaoru, have you made any friends recently?" my mother asked one night in our apartment. She was having a late dinner after returning from work. I had already eaten in the evening, but I was sitting at the table facing my mother, who was eating an expired bento she got from the grocery section.
"Eh, why do you ask?"
"You've been fidgeting, smiling, and then looking troubled, you're restless," my mom said while pointing the tip of her disposable chopsticks at me. We were still using disposable chopsticks and paper cups stolen from the department store as we didn't have proper chopsticks or cups at home yet.
"When your face is restless, you're usually thinking about someone you know," she continued. I didn't respond and turned my gaze to the television instead. It was a TV we had found in a garbage disposal area, now showing an information program per my mom's request, even though she forgets everything immediately after watching.
"What are you smiling about? It's irritating. I told you to tell me if you make any friends," she said while pressing her index finger on my forehead, not poking but pressing as if to drill a hole.
"Is your friend the same age as you? Someone from the neighborhood? It's not a girl, right?" she asked. I told her about Josuke.
"You know, the guy in the school uniform who helped us in the shopping street a while back, with the wooden box incident," I explained. Upon hearing this, my mom's previously cheerful demeanor vanished, and she lost her smile. The bright atmosphere in the room disappeared, leaving only the narration from the information program echoing.
"Isn't he a bit too old to be your playmate? He was dressed like a delinquent," she said worriedly. I was surprised by her reaction, and my spirits dampened.
"But he's a good person," I defended, but my mom remained

unconvinced.
"You're not being extorted, are you? Was there any sign that he had some ulterior motive for approaching you?" she asked, her skepticism fully evident.
"He's not like that," I replied in exasperation, and my mom looked straight into my eyes and nodded, holding her chopsticks still.

"If that's the case, then, well, alright," she said, letting a smile return to her face. She knew that I was not as young as I looked.
She then leaned forward on the table, resting her elbows on it, and talked about her day at the department store. It seemed she was doing well at work, which relieved me. In the towns we lived in before, she used to struggle with going to her part-time jobs. Still, she had to go every day because we barely had any money to live on. It's amazing how we've managed to get by on just my mom's part-time jobs. However, whenever we were in dire need of money, my mom would call someone and have money sent to us. I've seen her bowing her head while holding the receiver of a public phone. I never asked whom she was calling, but it seemed she considered contacting that person as a last resort and tried to avoid relying on them as much as possible.
"I'll quit as soon as I get my paycheck," that was her frequent saying when talking about her unsatisfactory job in the town we lived in before. Every day when she came home, she would collapse face down, exhausted, and vent her frustrations by complaining about her job to me. Most of the time, it was about how unpleasant her colleagues and bosses were. It seemed she was suffering significant mental damage from interpersonal relationships at that time. When she was venting her pent-up frustrations, her tone was extremely irritated.
When I would nod along to her complaints while reading a book, she would close the book with an annoyed and sullen face.
"Hey, are you even listening to what I'm saying?!!" she would snap, as if she was drunk.
After venting her frustrations, my mother would suddenly become quiet. Back then, our room had no television, just a sleeping bag, an alarm clock, and a glass jar filled with small change. If nobody spoke, the silence in the room was profound.
"You're the only one who listens to me..." she murmured one day,

leaning against the wall after venting her grievances. She looked incredibly tired, her shadow cast by the flickering fluorescent light. Her arms were pale and thin, almost like sticks. I noticed a blue bruise on her arm, a patch of her white skin turning almost black. When I pointed it out and asked what happened, she hid it with embarrassment.

"Just bumped into something at work. Silly mistake," she said with a weak smile. At that moment, I felt a tightness in my chest, almost suffocating.

My body was small, and my arms were not much thicker than my mother's. Yet, while my arms only seemed to cause trouble, my mother's arms were the ones that protected me. For some reason, that thought crossed my mind at that moment. I resolved to always listen to her if it could give her some rest, no matter how long it took.

To find out more about the coin that came out of my cheek, I visited the library every day. However, I couldn't figure out from what era or which country it originated. On July 5th, on my way home from the library in Morioh, I found myself sitting on a park bench. Though I was on my way back to the apartment, the sky was so clear and cloudless that I couldn't resist taking a break outside.

The park had a huge pond surrounded by a green lawn and scattered trees. The wooden bench was well-placed; sitting on it naturally made one face the center of the pond. A narrow path, used as a running track, ran behind the bench, and people occasionally passed by. The sun carried a hint of summer. I had sweated under my arms while walking, but the breeze felt pleasant as I sat on the bench. A tree nearby stretched its branches, providing a perfect shade. Listening closely, I could hear the rustling of leaves and the distant sounds of children playing.

An elderly man was sitting to my right on the bench. He was thin with sparse hair, holding a wooden cane with a hook-like handle. He leaned on it, resting both hands on the grip, his back slightly hunched. Wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, the sun created a dappled pattern of leaves on his back and shoulder sleeves.

The old man struck up a conversation with me, uttering a few casual, almost meaningless remarks—the kind an elderly person might make to a small child to pass the time. "Such beautiful weather we're having," he said softly, gazing at the pond's surface

where the opposite bank's forest and oddly shaped monuments were reflected upside down. It looked as though instead of water, there was a massive hole one could enter.
The old man spoke to me without any wariness. As usual, he likely had a misunderstanding about my age. I felt embarrassed inwardly, but it seemed odd to correct him diligently. Besides, to the old man, whether I was nine or six years old probably didn't matter.
I observed the old man's profile. His face had nicely shaped wrinkles. I wondered if, after decades, I would grow old like him. Or perhaps, my growth would cease, and wrinkles would form on my child-like face. The thought saddened me.
The old man, unaware of my gaze, continued talking. His monologue was such that it wouldn't have mattered if his audience wasn't listening—it was almost like talking to himself. He never took his eyes off the sun shining in the pond, continuing his story. From what he said, it seemed he made it a daily habit to sit on the bench and enjoy the view, and he had never lived outside of Morioh. Apparently, Morioh was different when he was a child.
Morioh had rapidly developed into a bedroom community of S City in the early 1980s. During that time, hills were leveled, and the land was flattened. I wondered what Morioh was like before that transformation. Maybe it was just an ordinary rural town. I couldn't imagine.
Since moving here, all of Morioh I had seen was beautiful. There was no filthy feel common in urban areas; it was clean like polished plastic. The shape and density of buildings, the number of trees planted to match them, everything was orderly. I had wondered about the origin of this

peculiar beauty but felt I found the answer while walking through the residential area the other day.
Three days ago, on July 2nd, Josuke took me to his house to hang out. I don't remember how it happened, but it was just a way to pass the time, nothing more. Walking beside Josuke, we talked about how neither of us had any money. He always seems to wear his school uniform, but apparently, he spends his money on branded shoes and socks.
Walking through the residential area, I was fascinated by the layout of the town and kept looking around. The first thing that caught my

attention was the wide spacing between the houses. The towns I had seen before had houses crammed together as if squeezed between the palms of two hands. Only in towns with low populations, like in the countryside, was there a wide space between houses. The former likely resulted from a lack of land for the population, and the latter, the opposite.
However, Morioh seemed different from both. Despite not having an excess of land due to a low population, the Western-style houses were never too crowded. The town was designed with spacious gardens and trees, giving it a relaxed feel. This harmony was unique, almost like a foreign country within Japan.
"Is it that unusual?" Josuke asked, slightly irritated, as he noticed me looking around. I realized that for those who live here, this scenery is normal. Embarrassed, I thought I should stop gawking. However, as we passed a house with a lawn, I couldn't help but stop.
The house had a red roof and white walls, surrounded by a fence no taller than an adult's knee, made of white boards crossed like a tic-tac-toe grid. Inside, tulips lined up, blooming, and the ground almost square between the house and the fence was covered in vivid blue grass. The lawn was neatly mowed, with a lawn mower in the corner of the yard. There seemed to be a child in the house; a small red bicycle was visible beside the lawn mower.
At that moment, in my mind, the lawn and Morioh overlapped. I felt that the beauty of Morioh was the same as the beauty of a lawn—artificial beauty. Not like the untamed beauty of a jungle or wild forest, but the beauty of something meticulously maintained by human hands.
Later, at Josuke's house, I heard about various events that had occurred in Morioh from him. He didn't go into details but told the stories as if they were ghost stories. For instance, souls of people killed by a murderer lived for years without passing on, streets not on the map, and it was hard to distinguish where the truth ended and the lies began.
I've heard Morioh has many missing people. The previous tenant of the apartment my mother and I live in also disappeared one day. Under the clear blue sky, this orderly town with its white buildings seems to have a deep, dark shadow on its flip side.
Beside me, the old man coughed, convulsing his thin shoulders. The pigeons near the bench's feet startled and flew away, becoming

smaller as they crossed the pond to the opposite bank.

The other side of the pond seemed far away. I could see small children playing on the opposite bank. The warmth made me feel content.

"Boy, do you live in Morioh?" the old man asked. His voice was like dried wood, parched, but listening to him was soothing. The old man, still looking towards the pond, continued the conversation showing only his profile to me.

I thought for a moment before responding, "I'm not sure if I can say whether I live here..."

The old man squinted his eyes and nodded as if he would be content with any answer I gave.

I'm currently in Morioh, but I'll probably move to another place soon. That's been the pattern so far.

"I feel more like I'm just passing through rather than living here..." I replied.

The old man nodded mechanically like an automated doll and asked another question. "Did you come to this park with your father or mother?"

He must have spent his days here on the bench, asking questions to the children passing by. Living in Morioh and spending these peaceful days seemed like a wonderful thing. The wind rustled the leaves, and the shadows cast by the old man's white shirt swayed. Leaves fluttered down in front of me, falling into the pond. The sun reflected in the water shattered and sparkled.

I shook my head in response. "I came to this park alone... My father isn't here. He died in a car accident."

The old man nodded, clasping and then releasing his hands that were resting on his cane. His fingers were thin and creased with wrinkles, very different from my own.

"Your mother is taking care of you, working hard, isn't she?"

"Yes, my mother works part-time at a department store to support me," I replied.

I looked down at my own toes. While sitting on the bench, my toes didn't reach the ground and just dangled in the air.

"It must be tough. Can you manage to get by?" The old man's voice was still calm, not showing any particular concern. I found that interesting.

"Well, I don't know. When things get precarious, my mother seems

to contact someone. Maybe she has some hidden assets somewhere..."
I remembered my mother bowing her head at a public phone.

"Hidden assets, huh..."
The laughter of children playing on the other side of the pond reached my ears faintly. The old man, still showing me his profile, continued speaking. "For instance, does your mother have expensive necklaces or jewelry, gold or silver artworks...?"
I felt something unnatural in the old man's words. Why would he suddenly mention artworks? I tilted my head and looked to the side, where the old man was scratching the back of his neck. It was more like he was tearing at his skin with his nails, which had a yellowish tinge, than just scratching. The sound was like something being devoured. The few remaining hairs on the back of his head got caught between his nails. His skin was already reddened.
“Oh, the boy has…” The old man's lips were gray and cracked. When his lips moved, a wet sound of saliva could be heard. The voice of the old man, accompanied by the moist sound of saliva and the dry sound of earth crumbling down his throat, resonated in my eardrums. “...The boy has been made to believe... that his father died in a traffic accident…”
The old man had stopped tearing at the back of his neck and placed his right hand back on his cane. While he had been gazing at the pond until now, his gaze was now directed at me. His body was in a forward-leaning posture, resting his weight on the cane, but his neck and above were upright as if impaled on the ground. His face was a sallow color, showing hardly any signs of life. Only his neck was turned sideways, looking at me. His eyes were unblinking, piercing through me.
“Boy... no matter where you are... I'll find you…”
There was a thick, yellow mucus at the corner of the old man's eyes. Dirt clung to the tips of the fingers of the old man's right hand resting on the cane. Between the nails of his index finger, middle finger, and ring finger, a blackish-red substance was lodged. Within the gray, wrinkled hands, the red color was striking. It was a clump of skin mixed with blood. Looking at the back of the old man's neck, there was blood from where he had been scratching. It seemed he had burst a pustule on his skin. From the aged, blemished skin, dark red blood oozed, flowing between the wrinkles. When the blood reached the collar of his shirt, it was absorbed into the white fabric

from the underside.
The old man's gaze remained fixed on me.
"......That woman.....where is she hiding it....."
Insects were buzzing around. Small winged insects flew around the old man and landed on his face, crisscrossed with wrinkles. The bugs moved swiftly and minutely over the surface of his face. The old man did not swat them away; he stayed motionless, his face turned to the left like a statue, only his lips moving slightly as he spoke. His purple tongue moved with saliva, the sound mixing with his voice, a wet sound intermingled with the dry crumbling of earth sliding down his throat.

"......That woman must have received it……where is she hiding it……I……"
The bugs that had been crawling on the old man's face disappeared into his thinning hair. Dark red blood continued to seep from the scratched skin at the back of his neck, staining the collar of his white shirt. The old man removed his left hand from the cane and placed it on my right hand resting on the bench. His palm was lukewarm and moist, feeling like it was clinging to the back of my hand. The old man's body, which had been facing the center of the pond, leaned towards me and his face approached closer. His cloudy eyes looked at me unblinkingly. I could feel the warm, smelly breath from the old man's mouth on the tip of my nose.
"Boy……you……where exactly……is that woman……where did she take you……"
I tried to stand up and escape from the old man. The old man's left hand gripped mine tightly. I managed to stand up, but I couldn't escape. The old man's grip was strong, almost crushing my bones. I didn't understand what was happening, but I knew something was wrong with the old man. It was dangerous to stay seated next to him.
"Somebody!" Just as I was about to shout, a voice called out from a distance.
"Grandpa, you were here. I've been looking for you." A slender woman approached the bench at a brisk pace. She was dressed in white, resembling a nurse. She made light footsteps as she moved in front of the bench and spoke.
"Come on, grandpa, it's time to get up. We need to get back soon." She glanced at me and smiled before peering into the old man's face.

She placed a hand on his shoulder and shook it gently. Then, as if he had just woken up, the old man raised his face. My hand was suddenly free, and both of the old man's hands were resting on top of the cane. I watched the nurse and the old man, gasping for breath. The old man looked drowsy and glanced around. He showed a shy and gentle smile to the nurse and stood up with a wobbly movement. He walked away from the bench, supported by the cane, accompanied by the nurse. They slowly disappeared down a narrow path flanked by broad-leaved trees. The trees formed a natural tunnel over the path, lush with green leaves. Sunlight poured over the leafy roof, casting summer shadows on the white garments of the old man and the nurse. I stood frozen, watching them leave. Near the park, there was a hospital. Its patients often strolled through the park. Perhaps the old man was one of them.

Across the pond, small children continued to play. Their laughter faintly reached across the pond as if nothing had happened. However, the imprint of the old man's grip remained yellow on my hand.

(The end)

Translated by Vish (@vishkujo)